

# Escape to U Taphao

## By Ralph Wetterhahn

Loading only the most valuable aircraft aboard the Midway meant, of course, that older combat aircraft, like the A-1 Skyraiders, would be left behind. These propeller-driven aircraft had proven effective in close-air-support and rescue operations, and Aderholt was not about to let them fall into Vietnamese hands. With the blessing of the Thai military, Aderholt ordered Youngblood and Major Jack W. Drummond, both pilots who had flown Skyraiders years earlier, to U Taphao to fly the A-1s to a "less conspicuous location."

"Start, taxi, and run up were accomplished and the thrill of sitting behind the single 3350 [Pratt & Whitney engine] came rushing back," wrote Drummond of the incident in a recent A-1 Skyraider Association newsletter. "Takeoff was no sweat. Both of us felt that we had probably made the best landings of our A-1 careers!"

They delivered the airplanes to Ta Khli Air Base in central Thailand and parked them out of sight in a hangar. (Aderholt was familiar with the base because he had worked with the CIA there to send U-2s on missions over China.) The two pilots returned to U Taphao and brought another pair of A-1s to Ta Khli. When the U.S. Embassy in Thailand found out about the F-5s that were given to the Thai air force and the movement of A-1s, Drummond and Youngblood were returned to their regular duties, and the remaining A-1s stayed at U Taphao.

While the U.S., Hanoi, and Thai governments arm wrestled, the Midway and several other Seventh Fleet ships slipped port loaded with 142 VNAF aircraft bound for Guam. At least one C-123K also made it out of Thailand. The last one to make it out of Viet Nam. Today tail number 54-0592 is at Avra Valley Airport in Marana, Arizona. No one remembers the details of how it came to be there.

Aderholt retired from the Air Force in 1976, but he stayed in Thailand for four more years--long enough to arrange transport home for the four A-1s he had sent to Ta Khli. He says today that he knew those aircraft had become rare in the United States and he wanted to make sure a few were preserved.

Aderholt rented tractors to pull the airplanes from Ta Khli to the Chao Prya River. He had them loaded on four barges brought up from Bangkok, which immediately got mired in shallows. Aderholt bribed the keeper of the Chainat Dam with 20,000 baht (\$1,000 at the time) to open the flood gates. The barges floated down river to the port, and the aircraft were loaded on a ship. Later, warbird collector Dave Tallichet brought them to Los Angeles and stored them at Orange County Airport until 1986. Tallichet still flies one of the Skyraiders out of Chino Field in California. Another is on display at the Santa Monica Museum of Flight in California.

No aircraft were sent back to Vietnam by the Thais. The Midway delivered its load of 101 VNAF aircraft to Guam, making it possible for 21 F-5Es to come back to the States through McClellan Air Force Base in California. Each had logged only 64 to 115 hours flying time. Most of them found their way to Williams Air Force Base in Arizona, where they were used to train foreign pilots. Of those, five were moved from Williams to Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada in 1977. For the next 12 years, the F-5Es were used in the 57th Wing Aggressor Squadrons to demonstrate Soviet Bloc tactics to U.S. pilots (see "Grounded: The Aggressor Squadrons," Feb./Mar. 1994).

In 1988 and 1989, the F-5s were sold to Brazil and Honduras; some spent a brief period with the U.S. Navy. But the U.S. pilots they had helped train went on to establish a 41:0 kill ratio against Soviet-trained Iraqis in the skies over Baghdad in 1991. No small part of that triumph can be attributed to the efforts of the VNAF pilots. Many of the airplanes they flew out of Vietnam are still flying missions around the world. Their own air force ceased to exist on April 30, 1975. Its official history covered 20 years, during which its pilots knew not a single moment of peace.

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